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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [PM](#) [POL](#) [SPECIALIST](#)

SUBJECT: Observers, a non-debate, more polls, and some caravans. Panama Election Countdown #12: 1 Week to go.

Ref: A. Panama 0896

[1](#)B. Panama 0892

[1](#)C. Panama 0886

Summary/Comment: Activity up. Still no problems

[1](#)1. (SBU) As campaigning hits a feverish pace, candidates Torrijos and Endara decided to skip the final, April 20 debate. Two final public opinion polls with conflicting results have generated controversy, as has another group of Endara supporters who made their support publicly known. The Electoral Tribunal (ET) announced that it has completed 85% of the necessary preparations for the May 2 elections. At the same time, observers are making the final arrangements for their May 2 assignments. Amid the blistering array of activity, Embassy has yet to note any elements of significant concern. Emboffs will cover final campaign events this weekend and next week.

Election Day preparations 85% complete

[1](#)2. (U) The Electoral Tribunal announced that they have completed 85% of the necessary preparations for the May 2 General Elections. Twenty-seven electoral committees have carried out their assigned tasks, detailed in the General Election Plan. Those tasks have included arranging transportation for voting materials and officials, training volunteer electoral officials to administer voting and vote-counting, establishing a nationwide communications network to transmit voting results, and informing voters how to register and how to vote.

Observers preparing & arriving

[1](#)3. (SBU) International and domestic observers are preparing for their May 2 role. During a two-day program funded by the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights, the Electoral Tribunal trained observers from Panama's Ombudsman's Office on electoral processes in Panama and other related issues. Embassy's 28 volunteer observers gathered for a group training and orientation session on Friday 4/23. Also, three representatives from the Japanese Embassy will observe Panama's elections. Finally, team leaders of the OAS observer mission arrived in Panama on Wednesday, 4/21. The rest of the 30-member delegation arrives next week. Ambassador Watt will meet with OAS representatives on Tuesday 4/27.

Torrijos and Endara skip national debate

[1](#)4. (SBU) When the two leading candidates declined at the last minute to participate in a highly anticipated April 20 national debate, only the three smallest TV networks (Catholic Church, Evangelical Church and the state-owned TV channel) covered it. Evidently fearing the last debate could dent his frontrunner status, PRD-PP candidate and poll leader Martin Torrijos announced his decision on April [1](#)9. His campaign coordinator said he withdrew to avoid unfair attacks from the other candidates as in the previous debate. For instance, Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman "reminded" Torrijos of a controversial presidential pardon he co-signed while briefly acting as Government and Justice Vice Minister during the Perez Balladares administration, and of extensive PRD embezzlement from the Social Security Fund during the military dictatorship.

[1](#)5. (SBU) The other candidates reacted quickly to Torrijos' move. Endara, second in all polls, followed Torrijos' lead and added that he "did not want to waste his time" with the remaining two candidates. Endara made fun of Torrijos' "weaknesses" and called him a "crybaby" (lloron). Endara said there was no use debating with the other two candidates since "they have no chance to win." Arnulfista

candidate Jose Miguel Aleman said Torrijos' position was disrespectful to voters. Aleman continued that he would honor his commitment to the Panamanian people and participate in the debate. CD Martinelli remarked that Torrijos "couldn't care less" ("no le importa tres pepinos") about the people and suggested that if Torrijos had backed out in such a manner from a "cock fighting pit" ("gallera") he would have been "stabbed" ("acuchillado").

16. (SBU) Sources indicated that the Arnulfistas might have been planning during the April 20 debate to "break" the story of a 1985 drug-related kidnapping to which Torrijos' opponents have tried to link him. (Note: The story finally did break on April 22 and will be reported Septel. For background, see reftel A. End Note.) While civil society leaders criticized Endara and Torrijos for not living up to their pledge to participate, media across the board only justified Torrijos' absence. The Arnulfistas then held a press conference (which no TV channel broadcast) accusing Torrijos of "being afraid of his past." For the second time, Arnulfistas distributed CDs containing copies of Public Ministry records on the case to press representatives. Except for the Catholic Church Channel's news (which barely mentioned the case) no other media reported the story.

The final polls

17. (U) Two polls were published this week with very different results. La Prensa's Ditcher & Neira poll continues to show PRD-PP candidate Martn Torrijos well in the lead at 47%, followed by Solidarity candidate Guillermo Endara at 28%, each one point down from the week before. Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman, a distant third at 19%, was the only candidate whose popularity increased since the last month (16%). Fourth place Cambio Democratico (CD) candidate Ricardo Martinelli ended up at 6%, also losing a point. In a paid advertising insert in Panama dailies, the Arnulfistas published the first and only poll that showed their candidate, Jose Miguel Aleman, winning. That poll shows Aleman winning with 39.7% of the vote, followed by Torrijos at 38.1%, Guillermo Endara at 14.3%, and CD Ricardo Martinelli at 3.5%. Electoral Prosecutor Gerardo Solis opened an investigation into this poll because Electoral Tribunal regulations requiring that polling methodology are certified before results are published. The dailies that published the poll could each be fined up to \$25,000.

18. (U) As stipulated in Panama's electoral law, Thursday, April 22 was the deadline for publishing public opinion polls. The measure is intended to prevent candidates from using doctored polls to influence voters. The Electoral Tribunal is looking to strengthen the democratic system by encouraging Panamanians to cast informed votes rather than just voting for the frontrunner, or the number two if the frontrunner is unattractive. Anyone publishing polls after April 22 will be fined.

Aleman and Endara stage caravans

19. (U) On Sunday, April 18, Arnulfista candidate Jose Miguel Aleman and his coalition allies staged a caravan along key avenues of Panama City. The caravan, with approximately 14,000 vehicles, surpassed Aleman's own estimate of possibly 7,000 cars. No serious incidents were reported despite the fact that the caravan passed Endara and Torrijos supporters. The Endara supporters were actively campaigning for their candidates along part of the Arnulfistas' route. Followers of Martin Torrijos actually came out of their residences with PRD-PP paraphernalia to taunt those participating in the caravan.

110. (SBU) Solidarity candidate Guillermo Endara decided not to hold a large public gathering to top off his campaign, opting instead for a six-day caravan through 29 communities from the Western province of Chiriqui on the Pacific coast to the Atlantic province of Colon. The caravan began with a poor turnout on April 22 in Puerto Armuelles, Chiriqui. Endara team sources in Chiriqui recently told PolOff, "we've got no chance in Puerto Armuelles." One of Solidarity's legislative candidates, Mayra Fuentes, was an active PRD member until the PRD's alliance with the Partido Popular (PP) frustrated her bid for a legislative candidacy, prompting her to defect to Endara's camp. Fuentes had also backed recently ousted and thoroughly disliked labor leader Jose Morris in a bitter dispute over control of the region's banana production.

11. (U) The National Liberal Republican Movement (MOLIRENA) is considering expelling five party members who have expressed public support for Solidarity Party presidential candidate Guillermo Endara instead of MOLIRENA's "official" candidate, Jose Miguel Aleman. (Party by-laws allow expulsion of those who disobey Party guidance.) The members to be expelled are Raymundo Hurtado Lay, a former legislator and until recently Panama's Ambassador to Paraguay; Gisela Chung, a former legislator and until recently Panama's diplomatic representative to the People's Republic of China; Plutarco Arrocha, former Governor of Panama Province and former Consul General in Vietnam; Luis B. Rosas, a former Deputy Comptroller General and Marilyn Vallarino, sister of Panama's current Vice President, Arturo Vallarino. Hurtado, Chung, Arrocha and Rosas all served their first public offices under President Guillermo Endara (1989-1994). COMMENT: When Guillermo "Billy" Ford joined the Endara Team, his departure from MOLIRENA accentuated an existing division in the party. The five siding with Endara show Ford's continued pull within MOLIRENA, as well as the "defectors'" support for Endara.

WATT